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Chinese Names

The names of Chinese people have their own tradition and characteristics. Unlike westerners, the family name in China is put first, followed by the given name. Interestingly a feme covert does not use her husband's family name. The given name usually contains one or two Chinese characters but in order to avoid confusion, newly-born babies are now entitled to be given names of three characters.

Given Name

Chinese names are meant to convey special meaning, with the given names often expressing the best of wishes on the new-born. Some imply the birthplace, birth time or natural phenomenon, like Jing (Beijing), Chen (morning), Dong (winter) and Xue (snow); Some embody the hope of virtue, like Zhong (faithful), Yi (righteous), Li (courteous) and Xin (reliable) while others express the wishes of life, like Jian (health), Shou (longevity), and Fu (happiness).

Family Name

Altogether some 22,000 family names have been used in China but over time, some of them have become reserved and only 3,500 are commonly used nowadays. The most popular three are Li, Wang and Zhang, respectively occupying about 7.9%, 7.4% and 7.1% of the whole Chinese population. There are 270 million Chinese people who own one of these top three surnames.

Among all the family names, 100 common ones cover almost 87% of the total population. Of these, 19 are more popular than others, including Li, Wang, Zhang, Liu, Chen, Yang, Zhao, Huang, Zhou, Wu, Xu, Sun, Hu, Zhu, Gao, Lin, He, Guo and Ma, and represent about half of the whole Chinese people.

Some Chinese have compound surnames, consisting of two characters, like Ou Yang, Tai Shi, Duan Mu, Shang Guan, Si Ma, Dong Fang, Du Gu, Nan Gong, among others. Now there are altogether 81 compound surnames existing in the country.

All Chinese people have equal rights to use their own names, which are legally protected. Generally speaking, a child is always entitled to the surname of his father. However, children nowadays in China do not have to do so; they can adopt that of their mother. Nicknames are often called in their childhood or by their confidants.

Addressing Chinese People

It is considered to be polite and respectful to address a Chinese people by his/her surname, followed by honorific titles like Xian1 Sheng1 (Sir), Nv3 Shi4 (Madam) or the job position. Given names are often called between good friends. Xiao3 Jie3 nowadays is considered to be an offensive way to address young ladies. Below is the general way to address various Chinese people.

English	Chinese Pinyin
Mr. Li	Li Xian1 Sheng1
Mrs. Wang	Wang Nv3 Shi4
Ms. Zhang	Zhang Nv3 Shi4
President Xi	Xi Zhu3 Xi2
Minister Zhou	Zhou Zong3 Li3
Manager Wang	Wang Jing1 Li3

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Questions & Answers on Chinese Names

Asked by Betty He from USA | Dec. 20, 2016 13:09

Reply

Hi! My name is Betty but my Chinese name is Qiaorong is my Chinese name my first name?

When I write forms, I don't know if I should put my name Betty in Parentheses. So is it my first name or last name? Qiaorong I just put it in the middle with no parentheses

Answers (1)

Answered by Sheryl from UNITED KINGDOM | Dec. 20, 2016 21:42

00Reply

So, I guess your last name is He, Betty He and He Qiaorong should be your full name in English and Chinese forms respectively. You can write down either of them and there is no need to use parentheses.

Asked by Nacchan from AUSTRALIA | Nov. 25, 2016 13:31

 Reply

How do I call a few years older people?

Do I call them gege? Or can I call him huang ge?

his surname is huang.

Answers (1)

Answered by Bill from CANADA | Nov. 27, 2016 21:51

 1  0  Reply

Nacchan, it is ok to call him Huang Ge or Huang Da Ge.

Asked by Brian from USA | Sep. 14, 2016 21:14

 Reply

The name "Xiao Jie Pan"

There is a young lady I know, and would like to know better. She introduced herself by her nickname, which I use, but I would like to impress her by using her actual name, but I am a bit confused. On a US state license document, she has the name "XIAO JIE PAN." Am I correct that "Xiao" is basically equivalent to the title "Miss," (only the Chinese still use it, while Americans don't so much anymore), that "Jie" is her given name, and that "Pan" is her family name? If I referred to her as "Xiao Jie Pan" (in a potential dating situation), would that be appropriate? Would there be a better way to address her? She's from somewhere near Macau, but not Macau. Thanks!

Answers (6)

Answered by Buckle from CANADA | Sep. 17, 2016 22:57

 3  1  Reply

Her name should be Pan Xiaojie. You can address her as Xiao Pan (intimate) or Miss Pan (respect).

Answered by Brian from USA | Sep. 18, 2016 07:32

 3  0  Reply

Thanks! So, in this situation, would I use the "intimate" version or the "respect" version?

Answered by Brian | Sep. 18, 2016 19:54

 3  0  Reply

Thanks again, Buckle, but I just realized I'm still a little confused by your answer. Doesn't "Xiao" mean "Miss." If so, I don't see how they are different (except that one is Chinese and one is English). I thought that the surname came first and then the title, so wouldn't it be "Pan Xiao"? I've also read that "měinǚ" might be more appropriate these days and that sometimes these days "xiaojie" used alone can have an inappropriate connotation. The main thing is that I just want her to see that I am trying to give a little extra effort even though I don't speak any Chinese at all. I want her to know I took the time to find out how to say it correctly, hopefully surprise and flatter her a little, be respectful, and also get across my intentions (romantic) without being overly flirtatious or inappropriate. I know that's a lot to pack into a greeting! More background is that I have already had several conversations with this Beautiful Girl, so I know her a little. I'm not addressing a stranger on the street. She has lived in the USA for ten years, and I am American. My romantic heart tells me to say "Pan Měinǚ," but I've also read that pretty much *everyone* is called "měinǚ" these days, so maybe that diminishes the effect I'm hoping for (or maybe it's just right?!). I'm surprised how hard it is to find a simple answer online! I'm sure I'm over-thinking this, but love is on the line! Any help is appreciated!

Answered by Sally from CHINA | Sep. 18, 2016 22:38

 3  0  Reply

Chinese people put the surname before the given name, so Pan must be her surname and the Xiao Jie is her given name.

Since you have known each other, maybe you can call her the intimate version, Xiao Pan. If in formal occasion, Pan Xiaojie may be more appropriate (Xiaojie here is not her given name but of the same pronunciation in Chinese, it means Miss).

It is recommended that you don't call her Meinǚ. Most girls may think you are flirting with them and doing so may leave a bad impression. And yes, you got it. People call every girl Meinǚ here, so it is not an innovation. Just avoid it.

Good luck!

Answered by Brian from USA | Sep. 30, 2016 14:04

 3  1  Reply

I keep getting more confused! If I call her Xiao Pan am I calling her basically "Given-name Surname" or am I calling her "Miss Pan."? If it's "Given-name Surname," then isn't the order backwards? Also, whichever it is, please tell me which tone "Xiao" has! Thanks so much.

Answered by Judy from HONG KONG | Nov. 11, 2016 00:09

 3  0  Reply

Based on your words, this lady's name is Pan Xiaojie. Pan is her family name and Xiaojie is the given name. You can just call her given name, Xiaojie, as you have talked with her before.

The word Miss in Chinese also reads as Xiao Jie which happens to have the same pronunciation with the lady's given name. So, this might confuse you the most.

Asked by melissa from PERU | Aug. 15, 2016 23:13

 Reply

What would be the last and first name for Zhen Yz Yang and also for Zhi Gang Yu

YuYang is the daughter's last name

Thank you for the help.

Answers (1)

Answered by Eleanor from SWITZERLAND | Aug. 16, 2016 20:40

 3  1  Reply

The surnames should be Yang and Yu respectively. Zhen and Zhigang should be the first names.

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